

Textual Transmission as Textual Participation: The Case of Materialism in S.Y. Agnon's Perception of Language

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One of the most fundamental notions of rabbinic Judaism is that concerning *textual transmission*. The Jewish text is always on the move—sometimes back and forth—from God to humanity, from generation to generation, from teacher to students. Textual transmission encompasses and even necessitates another idea, that of *textual participation*. A text does not simply change hands; it is always transformed in the process, and the agents of this process, by the very act of transmission, are those who reshape the text. This essay seeks to show the ways in which such notions are incorporated in the belletristic work of Shmuel Yosef Agnon.

Textual transmission, in the context of the present essay, is part and parcel of the broader notion of “linguistic materialism.” The material aspect of language is everything that reveals language to our senses. Linguistic materialism is perceived here as the idea that *meaning* is to be found, not only in words, but also in the concrete material of which language is made. Thus, in order for a text to be transmitted, one or more objects need to be exchanged. Sounds, ink, paper, parchment, letters, books: all are materialistic manifestations of language that enable the act of textual transmission.

Agnon was a conscious agent in the process of textual transmission. This is apparent, for instance, in his work as an anthologist. The anthologies compiled by Agnon are not merely a summing up of Jewish discourse on language and its derivatives. They are also doors, textual stations, as it were, through which one can traverse and evaluate the whole of his oeuvre. They serve, as will be seen, as a depository for relevant sources in the analysis of Agnon's work. In addition, they are the very embodiment of his notion of textual transmission.

Agnon was born in 1887 in Buczacz, Polish Galicia (now Buchach, Ukraine). When he was only 16, he published poems and short prose in various Jewish journals, in both Yiddish and Hebrew. In 1908, he emigrated to Ottoman Palestine, where he published several short stories in Hebrew; for his livelihood, he worked alongside Arthur Ruppin at the Palestinian office of the Zionist Organization. In 1912, both Agnon and Ruppin went to Germany. Although Ruppin returned after a while to Palestine, Agnon remained in Germany for 12 years. In the first years of his stay, he

worked as an editor at the Jüdischer Verlag.¹ He was not particularly interested in the “special occasion” anthologies produced by this publishing house.² However, once he turned to subjects close to his heart, such as the High Holy Days, language (Hebrew) and books (Torah and everything emanating from it), he became a dedicated compiler of anthologies—as Gershon Scholem noted, anthology compilation was “much more than a mere sideline in his creative work as a writer.”³ According to Baruch Kurzweil, Agnon felt obliged to persevere in what he regarded as a sacred endeavor even though this necessitated a substantial amount of time and effort on his part; Kurzweil himself was “astounded by the enormous compromise and sacrifice evident in Agnon’s self-abnegation.”⁴

Following his return to Mandate Palestine, Agnon published three anthologies, *Yamim noraim* (Days of Awe; 1938, 1947) *Sefer sofer vesipur* (Book, Writer, and Story; 1938) and *Atem reitem* (You Yourself Have Seen; 1959).⁵ In a response that was perhaps intended to assuage his own conscience or else to respond to a critic who might accuse him of wasting his artistic energy,⁶ Agnon told David Kena’ani: “There is power in the act of dissemination, as in the making of encyclopedias [and the anthologies].”⁷ Whereas *Days of Awe* is an anthology of sources concerning Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the other two tell the story of Jewish textual transmission: they are texts about texts. Agnon continued working on the latter two anthologies over the course of his career; after his death, updated versions of *Sefer sofer vesipur* and *Atem reitem* were published (in 1978 and in 1995, respectively). The new editions of the books encompassed a substantially greater number of sources and themes. Nevertheless, language remained the meta-subject of each. Concerning *Sefer sofer vesipur*, Agnon noted that it was “an assemblage of legends about books and authors,”⁸ whereas *Atem reitem* concerned itself with the gathering and Revelation at Sinai.⁹ One of the dominant themes in these anthologies is a materialistic notion of the Hebrew language, as described above. Indeed, this notion permeates not only the anthologies but Agnon’s work as a whole; it is so inherent in his worldview and literary practices that one cannot imagine the Agnonian universe without it. And yet, like gravity, its very omnipresence may cause it to go unnoticed, such that readers are likely to overlook the force it exerts on Agnon’s literary mechanisms.

The Notion of Natural Language in Agnon’s Creative Mind

In the “secular” (or conventional) perspective regarding language, there is no necessary link between the form of language (whether written or oral) and the content it seeks to denote. In contrast, the “religious” or “mystical” perspective holds that there *is* an inherent, natural connection between words and the things they describe. The “table,” for example, as an object in all its meanings (shape, possible uses, and so on) can be described only through the word “table”; that is, the actual sound of the word, and its orthography, are indispensable parts of the object’s “tableness.”¹⁰

This primitive, or natural, linguistic perception of language has many variations. Thus (to choose a paradigm far removed from Jewish thought), many Japanese, even today, believe in *kotodama*, which “literally refers to the mysterious power dwelling in words. In ancient times, it was believed that what words represented would be

realized by kotodama's supernatural power."¹¹ According to J.M.Y. Simpson, this "primitive" linguistic perception of language is marked by three dominant assumptions: namely, the (sacred) origin of language, the natural connection between words and things, and the perceived power of language to shape reality.¹² In this regard, consider the following opening of Agnon's short story "The Sense of Smell":

The holy tongue [Hebrew] is a language like no other. All other tongues exist only by agreement, each nation having agreed upon its language. But the holy tongue is the one in which the Torah was given, the one through which the blessed Holy One created His world.¹³

Given the perceived sacred origin of Hebrew, one of the more astonishing ideas expressed in rabbinical Judaism is that the "holy tongue" existed before the creation of the world.¹⁴ The Torah, which according to traditional Jewish belief was authored by God, is regarded as always having existed, even prior to the world of phenomena:

Nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created, the Torah was already written and nestling in the bosom of the Holy One, blessed be He, reciting song with the ministering angels. For it is said [Prov. 8:30], "Then I was with Him as a nursing, and I was daily all delight."¹⁵

Agnon chose this midrash for the opening of *Sefer sofer vesipur*.¹⁶ In similar fashion, the first chapter of *Atem reitem* is titled "Before Creation," and in it Agnon raises the subject of the Torah's preexistence in relation to the world, as discussed in numerous sources. According to traditional belief, not only did the Torah exist before the world, it helped God create the world: it was the blueprint, as it were, that God, like an architect, consulted before he made the world the way it is.

The second characteristic of the primitive, natural perception of language concerns the intimate relationship between words and things. Reality, as it emanates from language, blurs the border between words and things. The narrator in *'Ad henah (To This Day)*,¹⁷ for instance, bears Agnon's own first two names, Shmuel Yosef, and in addition, the two share many biographical characteristics. In consequence, the traditional dichotomy between author/character is effaced. At one point, Shmuel Yosef offers a lament: "There are words for every occasion. What a pity there aren't occasions [*devarim*] for every word."¹⁸ Shmuel Yosef's proclamation subverts the common Western notion of some occasions being "beyond words" or the Romantic poet's cry: "Oh! If only I had words for the things I feel!" According to Shmuel Yosef/Agnon, there *are* sufficient words; one must merely have the proper occasion to use them. Put somewhat differently, language is limited not by the world itself, but by the poverty of occasions in the world.

In Hebrew, there is a manifest connection between word and thing: the word *davar* means both. Moreover, the biblical story of creation tells us that creation was carried out through language, as in the famous formula of "God said, let there be X, and there was X." Agnon gives the following citation from the Zohar's version of the creation story:

When God decided to create the world, He looked at the Torah, at each and every word, and fashioned the world accordingly. . . . [I]t is written, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Looking at this word [i.e., “heavens”], God created the heavens. . . . And so it went, with each and every word in the Torah: the Holy One, blessed be He, looked at the word and created the thing to which it referred.¹⁹

If the origin of the Torah (language, Hebrew) is transcendent to reality, if the Torah is “radically ontologized”²⁰ and language is what constructs the world, it seems obvious that it also has the power to shape reality. This powerful tool of language, used by God himself to create the world, is now in the hands of humans, enabling them—indeed, demanding of them—to use it, and to use it wisely. In the Talmud, R. Meir offers the following advice he received from R. Yishmael with regard to his work as a scribe: “My son, be careful in your vocation, for your vocation is heavenly service, and care must be taken [when working on a new Torah scroll] lest you omit a single letter or add a single letter out of place, and you end up destroying the whole world in its entirety.”²¹

In philosophical terms, the dichotomy between natural and conventional language was first formulated in Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*. Aristotle, Plato’s student, follows the conventional path when he writes: “A name is a spoken sound significant by convention. . . . I say ‘by convention’ because no name is a name naturally but only when it has become a symbol.”²² The connection between words and things, according to him, is arbitrary, and written signs are of no ontological significance. In his short story “The Sign,” Agnon summarizes how Aristotle’s model of language operates:

Every word he said was carved into the forms of letters, and the letters joined together into words, and the words formed what he had to say. These are the things as I remember them, word for word.²³

Agnon, at least declaratively, belongs to those who perceive language (Hebrew) as a natural entity. Reading “The Sign,” one may have the impression that Agnon is negating, even mocking, Aristotle’s model. Instead of a linear flow from things (reality) to thought, spoken words, and written signs, we have an endless loop. In the beginning was language. The words, already existing—neither created nor shaped through reality—are “carved into the forms of letters.” Then they join to create words, and to shape “what he had to say.” Just in case the reader does not understand the irony, Agnon adds: “These are the things as I remember them, word for word.” Remembering is what happens when memory and language come together. In Agnon’s model as described here, language is what begets things and not vice versa. From there the process of remembering occurs, the remembering of things only to dissolve them again into words, into the idiom “word for word.” Remembering, by the very utterance of a given event, also reshapes it. The remembering of a text is a re-textualization of that text, and thus connects transmission of the text (that is, remembering) with participation in it.

In this vein, Agnon was not only an agent of textual transmission—that is, someone who receives and passes on a given corpus of texts—but also a textual participator. A famous distinction between two kinds of students, one who is like “a cistern sealed

with lime that does not lose a drop” versus one who is like “a wellspring” (Avot 2:8), appears in many other classic rabbinical texts (for example, Horayot 14a; Berakhot 64a). The Torah, embodied as water, is retained by the scholar who remembers it (who “does not lose a drop”) and continually renewed by the scholar who is like a wellspring. Indeed, Jewish textual transmission includes, by definition, the component of participation. There are many famous sources demanding from the Jewish believer not merely to learn the Torah but also to renew it.²⁴

Textual participation is an intrinsic part of textual transmission in Agnon’s work even in the case of the anthologies he compiled, which, on the surface, may appear to be pure textual transmission. In fact, Agnon succeeds in turning them into an exercise in active textual participation. In a collection of Agnon’s extra-literary texts, *Me’atzmi el ’atzmi*, he relates how he once abandoned a book project “because of people who pile up books” by means of claiming authorship of others’ works: “After my book *Days of Awe* was published, along came parasites . . . who took what I had labored on and made books for themselves. Among these false authors were those who acquired [my book] by making changes in it . . . and those who copied from my book without understanding what they were copying.”²⁵ If an anthology is a collection of sources, how can one plagiarize it? More intriguing, how can one know that a given anthology is a plagiarism of another, given that the sources within are available to all? In his interview with David Kena’ani, Agnon clarified the matter, explaining that he had “added” a source to the anthology, a book titled *Kol dodi*. Yet this book does not really exist. Rather, Agnon claimed, it is “the voice I hear in time of inspiration or epiphany.”²⁶ This explanation (which substantiates Agnon’s claim that others plagiarized his work, as they presumably quoted from *Kol dodi*) attests to the fact that he conceived of his anthologies as true creations, in a manner reminiscent of Borges’ famous story about Pierre Menard, the (imaginary) author who rewrote *Don Quixote*.²⁷

Golden Letters in *To This Day*

The smallest units of written language are letters. Agnon’s anthologies contain many references to letters; in *Sefer sofer vesipur*, he devotes an entire section to the subject.²⁸ The texts he cites cover various aspects of the topic, among them, the importance and origin of the individual letters as well as the Hebrew alphabet in its totality (22 letters, or 27, if one counts five letters occurring only at the end of words). “Our holy letters,” writes Agnon, quoting from the 17th-century ethical treatise *Shenei luhot habrit*, “are not conventional like the letters of the [other] nations, which are only signs; [our letters] are holy substances carved from above.”²⁹

This positive attitude toward letters and their power was expressed by Agnon on various occasions. The most well-known example is his use of the letters *’ayin* and *gimel*, which play a prominent role in works such as “Edo and Enam” and “Forever.”³⁰ In these stories all the characters’ names start with an *’ayin* or *gimel*, the first two letters of Agnon’s name as spelled in Hebrew. Elsewhere, however, Agnon shows how the power of letters can be abused. In what follows, we shall examine one of the

many themes appearing in *To This Day*, Agnon's last novel to be published during his lifetime.

As noted, the hero-narrator Shmuel Yosef (his last name is not given) shares a number of biographical characteristics with Agnon the author. Like Agnon, Shmuel Yosef has traveled from Palestine to Germany sometime prior to the outbreak of the First World War, and in the course of the story, he goes from place to place, trying to find a place to stay. What prompts one of his journeys (to a town called Grimma) is a request made by the widow of a certain Dr. Levi to come to her house and advise her on the library she has been left with: two rooms full of rare books.

Two of the many characters appearing in *To This Day* are Isaac König and Dr. Mittel.³¹ The former wants to create new Hebrew fonts, while the latter is a renowned bibliographer of Jewish books. Both deal with the materialistic aspect of language—its form, rather than its content. Herr König, who casts his new letters in the workshop of Kaiser & Co., wishes to get the approval of Dr. Mittel, who tells him:

You can see how unfairly I've been treated. I've been accused of being ungenerous towards the younger generation of bibliographers—but not only can they have their share of the books you print, they can have my share too, because I don't even want to look at them.³²

In a bizarre twist, it turns out that Kaiser & Co. is linked with none other than Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941), who ruled Germany during the First World War:

Above them rose the Reform temple with its gilded tiles [in the original Hebrew text, the word is *levenim*, or bricks] made by the Wilhelm Kaiser Royal Tile Works. Once, the joke went, the Jews made bricks for the Pharaoh and now the Kaiser made tiles for the Jews. Moreover, he made them of gold while Pharaoh's bricks were made of clay and straw.³³

Agnon here is drawing a connection between Kaiser Wilhelm and Pharaoh—both of them mighty kings of empires in which Israel was in exile. In another place, he draws a different set of parallels, between the Hebrew letters and stone (bricks). In order to fully appreciate the link, one must be aware of the fact that *To This Day* contains numerous allusions to *Sefer yetzirah* (Book of Creation).³⁴ This work, traditionally attributed to the Patriarch Abraham though it was actually written sometime between the second and sixth century, is the earliest known kabbalistic book. It describes three dimensions of being: the world (cosmology), the year (time) and the human body. One of the most notable characteristics of *Sefer yetzirah's* terminology is its use of *even* (stone) for letter and *bayit* (house) for word, as in the following segment:

Two stones build 2 houses. Three stones build 6 houses. Four stones build 24 houses. Five stones build 120 houses. Six stones build 720 houses. Seven stones build 5040 houses. From here on go out and calculate that which the mouth cannot speak and the ear cannot hear (4:16).³⁵

In order to exhaust the permutational potential in a given word, one must use the factorial. Two letters can create two words—as with אב (father) and בא (come). By

applying the factorial to a three-letter word, we obtain 6 different possibilities, and a seven-letter word can create as many as 5,040 different words.

What seems at first to be a whimsical connection between Pharaoh and Kaiser Wilhelm, becomes more understandable once we see how *Sefer yetzirah* formulates the analogies between letters and stones (bricks) and words and houses. This, however, is by no means the last of Agnon's linkages. Later on, Shmuel Yosef makes reference to a tale recounted in a story titled "The Outcast," which was written by Agnon. This occurs in a scene where, after parting from his non-Jewish lover, Shmuel Yosef runs into an acquaintance—a Reform Jew—who chides him by making reference to the biblical story of the Israelites' whoring after Moabite women (Num. 25:1–9). In response, Shmuel Yosef recalls a tale about a rabbi:

You may have heard of the consternation of the great Rabbi Gershom when, confronted by a man who had sinned, he recognized the same evil impulse in himself. And this happened as he was coming from a synagogue, a holy place! Imagine then how someone like me, having just parted from a German woman, felt to be reminded of the Moabites that Israel had whored after—and by a Reform Jew, of all people, the kind we scoffed at for being more German than the Germans.³⁶

With this allusion to "The Outcast," Agnon creates a participating textual transmission of his own work.³⁷ It is entirely plausible that when the narrator of *To This Day*, Shmuel Yosef, characterizes Reform Jews as "the kind we scoffed at for being more German than the Germans," he speaks in the name of Agnon the author.

The synagogue appearing in *To This Day* is both a concrete and a metaphorical space. It is a new building, a gilded-tiled house of worship that offers its congregants what is essentially a new set of prayers, even if these are based on the traditional Jewish liturgy. And as Agnon reminds us, it is no longer a synagogue, but rather a Reform temple. If one still doubts Agnon's poetical attitude toward such a temple, the following source from *Sefer sofer vesipur* dispels such doubts: "The story goes that someone once brought to the Sages the Torah of Alexandros, and all the Divine Names in it were written in gold. And the Sages said: It must be put away [*tiganez*]."³⁸ Like German Reform Jewry, the intentions of the scribe who wrote the Torah of Alexandros were apparently innocent: in order to differentiate between God and his creatures, he wrote God's sacred name in gold. The Sages, however, found this "golden" Torah unsuitable for reading—yet at the same time holy enough to be stored alongside other out-of-use sacred Jewish texts.

In *To This Day*, golden letters are linked with Herr König, the creator of fonts. Agnon—or at least his narrator, Shmuel Yosef—expresses mixed feelings toward this character. On the one hand, König is a "likable, good-natured man with hands of gold. Everything he did had an artist's flair. Even his Hebrew characters, though not in favor with Isaac Mittel, were popular with the printers."³⁹ On the other hand, König is the one who was once consulted about a certain gift given to Nachum Berish, a dayan (rabbinical judge), by one of the more important members of his flock. Berish, telling the story, comments that the gift-giver "brought it to me pleased as punch, as if he were giving me, ay, ay, ay, who knows what treasure."⁴⁰ What was the gift? A biblical cyclopedia—a concordance, a compendium of all the words of the Bible—"bound in

leather with gold letters.”⁴¹ This gold-plated present, expensive though it was, was an unwanted gift, and the giver’s good intentions were for naught.

Elsewhere in *To This Day*, Agnon draws a different set of negative connections between language (again, Hebrew), stone, and gold. These connections involve a certain bibliographer named Steinschneider. Though Steinschneider’s first name is not given in *To This Day*, one cannot help but think of Moritz Steinschneider, the famous German Jewish bibliographer who was one of the most important figures of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*; he died in 1907, which fits the timeframe of Agnon’s book. In *To This Day*, Steinschneider is mourned, so to speak, by his rival, Dr. Mittel (the latter was once “mentioned in a footnote with an exclamation point as if to say, ‘So says Mittel, and you can believe him if you care to’”).⁴² The name “Steinschneider” translates as a lapidary, or stonemason. In addition, “Schneider” means tailor (in both German and Yiddish), and this suggests another interesting onomastic interpretation: Steinschneider as a “a tailor of stones,” or, by analogy, a tailor of letters.⁴³

According to literary critic Dan Miron, Agnon’s representation of Steinschneider embodies a critique of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.⁴⁴ The letter/stone analogy reinforces this thesis. First, the narrator-author’s unhidden affection for Dr. Mittel, Steinschneider’s adversary, causes the reader to perceive the latter in a negative light. Then, recalling the biblical prohibition not to build altars with hewn stones (see, for example, Ex. 20:21), Steinschneider’s figure (or, at least, his name) becomes imbued with an additional negative dimension. Both the historical figure Moritz Steinschneider and his character in *To This Day* work in the sphere of Jewish and Hebrew books. His name hints that, like the gilded tiles of the Reform temple, and like the golden concordance presented to Nachum Berish, Steinschneider’s well-intended bibliographic work in the name of Jewish studies, while seemingly authentic, is somehow lacking. Seeking to create a new form of textual transmission, Steinschneider does violence to Jewish tradition. Thus, like the well-meaning Cain standing in front of his altar, Steinschneider’s offerings are unwanted in God’s/Agnon’s eyes.

“As Is the Effort, So Is the Reward”: Textual Transmission as Textual Participation

In “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar” (As Is the Effort, So Is the Reward), the opening story of Agnon’s last collection, *Haesh veba’etzim* (The Fire and the Wood), the central character is a *payetan*, a composer of religious poems, whose very name, Mar Ribbi Tzidkiyah (God’s righteousness), emblemizes his moral rectitude.⁴⁵ Like Agnon, R. Tzidkiyah creates his works during a period of national post-trauma; although not stated explicitly, it appears that the story takes place around the time of the early Crusades.⁴⁶ Following an introductory section in which the reader learns of R. Tzidkiyah’s great piety and high standing in his community, Agnon turns to the tale proper:

Let us turn our eyes from the Shechinah, which not every eye can look into, and let us observe the deeds of those beloved by God, poets of His righteousness such as Mar Ribbi Tzidkiyah and his colleagues.⁴⁷

This brief and apparently straightforward paragraph expresses a profound idea: since we cannot understand God's deeds, we cannot understand creation, or—to put it differently—we cannot understand anything that is beyond language. Let us, therefore, concern ourselves with language itself, that is, with what we share with the Creator. Let us observe how a human being, one of us, is participating in the divine creation. The connection between R. Tzidkiyah and Agnon is made stronger through the use of the plural first person in this paragraph. Agnon undoubtedly considered himself to be one of R. Tzidkiyah's "colleagues," one of those who write by and for the grace of the Lord.⁴⁸ Indeed, Agnon, who came from a Levite family, regarded himself as being akin to the Levites at the Temple, "standing [. . .] on the platform with [his] singing brothers, reciting each day the song that the Levites sang in the Temple."⁴⁹

For R. Tzidkiyah, writing is a religious act. Not only does he write only after praying to God, he also looks into his heart to see if his intentions are good, lest he be like those wicked ones who are scorned by God: "What right have you to recite my laws?" (Ps. 50:16).⁵⁰ While writing, he painstakingly examines "every word to see if it has its origin in the Torah or the words of the Sages."⁵¹ One cannot but be reminded of Agnon's "The Sense of Smell," which is nothing less than a score-settling with a critic who had dared to question his use of language.⁵² Agnon here uses R. Tzidkiyah's work methods to explain his own, to dispel any possible suspicion concerning his own use of Hebrew. In addition to writing poetic texts, R. Tzidkiyah sets them to music, "guiding the words according to the subject." In this way, even "those who were ignorant and uneducated, lacking understanding of the words, had their hearts filled with the melody."⁵³ The body of the religious song—its matter, words, spirit, and melody—thus becomes one.

One of R. Tzidkiyah's unique writing rituals is to set aside a copper coin for each day he dedicates to writing, to be used as alms. He ties the fate of each *piyut* to the person who is given the coin: if the recipient is both learned and of good character (*ba'al midot*), R. Tzidkiyah takes this to mean that his poem is both well-written and religiously worthy. If not, he either sets it aside or—in the case of the beggar being neither well-mannered nor learned—burns it.⁵⁴ R. Tzidkiyah is not the only one to think that alms influence the spiritual quality of discourse; as recounted by Agnon (in the name of R. Nachman of Breslev) in *Sefer sofer vesipur*, by "giving alms for its own sake you'll receive Torah for its own sake."⁵⁵ The outer world, the world of matter and deeds, thus determines the spiritual world, the world of aesthetics and religion. The traditional tension between intellectual merit (Torah) and good deeds (*mitzvot, derekh erez*) is erased, because they are mutually dependent. Indeed, R. Tzidkiyah sets aside coins for charity even on days he is not writing but rather working on behalf of the community, whether at home or in the rabbinical court.

R. Tzidkiyah's poems have a moral and social dimension. Reciting them at the synagogue, he can "attend to the hearts of the despondent and strengthen them with the commandments of the great and holy God . . . for in these generations the hand of Edom was on the neck of Israel, decreeing that they not occupy themselves with the learning of Torah."⁵⁶ Clearly, language influences reality; words make things happen. But Agnon does not stop here. From the outset, words for R. Tzidkiyah are not merely tools to better understand, convey, or change reality. Rather, reality and language are

intertwined. R. Tzidkiyah, like Agnon in his own eyes, is one of the chosen few, one of “the holy poets” whom “God chose to sing His might” and, because he was righteous, his “quill was overflowing with alphabetical acrostics and holy and magnificent rhymes.”⁵⁷ At the same time, this fountain of inspiration does not overflow in a manner devoid of order or system, but rather is cast in the molds of literary constraints, rhymes, and acrostics—another material aspect of the poetic use of language.

Moreover, through the use of coins, R. Tzidkiyah creates sacred time within the secular time one may call human life. He counts the time consecrated for the work of God through writing, learning, or working on behalf of others. His life has been given to him by God, but his existential duty is to create his own life, his own time—to write it with the coins he gives, like vanishing ink, to the next beggar knocking on his door.

At its core, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar” is the tale of one specific *piyut* composed by R. Tzidkiyah as a means of consoling the people of Israel. Why is it, he wonders, that “every day we are murdered, and every day we are slaughtered, and every day we are being bound [*ne’ekadim*] . . . and we accept everything with love.”⁵⁸ Pondering the biblical story of *’akedat Yitzhak*, the binding of Isaac, he writes a poem that he regards as worthy; in fact, he plans to make use of it that year on Yom Kippur, the day on which, according to tradition, the binding of Isaac occurred. Because he believes his poem to be exceptionally good, he decides to test it by means of a golden rather than a copper coin. Yet the poor man who arrives at his home is not at all righteous or learned. Agnon describes him as a kind of negative Job. Like Job he suffers—“the sufferings are crying out from his body”—but unlike Job, he does not keep silent. When R. Tzidkiyah tries to console him, saying, “God will help you,” the pauper only gets angrier. He is angry not only with R. Tzidkiyah, but, even worse, with God, saying, “God is rich, and I am poor, God has everything, and I have nothing.”⁵⁹ An inherent part of the negative moral characterization of the poor man is the way he treats language: “And furthermore, the pauper said things one could not understand, because moving his tongue caused him pain, and he was chopping off the beginnings of words and swallowing the ends of words, and prefacing each matter with . . . ‘what shall I tell you,’ and he was angry because, in the meanwhile, he forgot what he wanted to say.”⁶⁰ To add insult to injury, the pauper is suspicious. One does not give a whole golden coin as alms, he thinks to himself—this must be a plot to get him arrested by the city authorities.

Once the poor man has left, R. Tzidkiyah is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, he feels that his poem is worthy to be recited in synagogues on Yom Kippur. On the other, he has to follow his rule that the quality of the beggar receiving the alms determines the quality of the poem. Other considerations also come to mind. Perhaps one cannot blame the poor man, because he was truly suffering—if so, perhaps he is not so reprehensible, and thus the poem is worth keeping? In the end, R. Tzidkiyah chastises himself: “I, who cannot appease the mind of one poor man of Israel, have made myself an emissary on behalf of Israel? . . . And if that were not sufficient, I am turning a sacrifice made for God into a poem.”⁶¹ Like many honest artists trying to depict human catastrophe, R. Tzidkiyah struggles with the moral issue of translating horror into art. He voices Agnon’s own predicament after the Holocaust: it is as if Agnon, through R. Tzidkiyah, wants to explain to his readers, and perhaps to himself, why it was so difficult for him to address the Holocaust directly in his work.⁶²

R. Tzidkiyah decides to burn his poem, now dubbed by Agnon “his *'akedah*.” Full of remorse, he scolds himself: “For this speck of ashes I neglected the study of Torah, I turned aside from my wife and daughters.” His soul tries to give him solace, saying, “Tzidkiyahu, do you think you create poems on your own?”⁶³ When R. Tzidkiyahu understands that his poem might have been acceptable to God, that he might have destroyed it for no good reason, his sorrow only grows. Apart from one exception, he ceases altogether from writing after burning his *'akedah*.

Before we move on, we must note a very important detail. After R. Tzidkiyah burns his poem, his name becomes Tzidkiyahu. In case some readers fail to notice this shift, Agnon makes the matter explicit at the end of the story, informing us that the poet’s soul “added [the letter] *vav* of the Name of Four to the two letters already in his name.”⁶⁴ Of three letters (*yud*, *vav*, and *hei*) that form the Tetragrammaton, the letter *hei* appears twice. When Agnon changes the name Tzidkiyah into Tzidkiyahu, he adds the missing third letter. Something similar happens in the Bible when Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah (Gen. 17:5; 17:15). The letter *hei* is not only the most prominent letter of the Tetragrammaton. It is also the sole letter in the Hebrew alphabet that can, by itself, represent the name of God.

In the case of Tzidkiyah/Tzidkiyahu, it is as if Agnon renders divine the poet’s poetico-theological doubts, and even more, so his decision to sacrifice his poem, to “bind” his *'akedah*. As in the case of Abram-Abraham (the original binder) and Sarai-Sarah, names are not merely letters and sounds, but rather determine the quality of those bearing them.

To be sure, it appears at a certain point in the story that deeds may be more important than language. As noted, after R. Tzidkiyahu burns his poem, he ceases writing altogether. Nevertheless, he continues giving alms, “and since his hands are giving alms of their own accord, why should he be involved in the making of poems?”⁶⁵ It seems that Agnon here is going back to the traditional, commonsensical notion of regarding language as a contingent tool to deeds, objects, and reality. Immediately thereafter, in the next sentence he writes: “And now go see how God rewards the faithful.” Years have passed; R. Tzidkiyahu is old and bedridden. On Yom Kippur, his grandson dresses him and brings him, in his bed, to the synagogue. R. Tzidkiyahu is in a terrible state of mind. When he hears the cantor singing his poems, he is in great agony, remembering his burnt *'akedah*. In fact, he never really gave up his poems for the “real world,” for “real deeds.” While other worshippers leave the synagogue for a brief pause between the *musaf* and *minḥah* prayers, R. Tzidkiyahu remains in his bed, mourning his physical and spiritual condition. Then, all of the sudden, he starts to pray to God, saying the words of a famous liturgical poem, “*Ayaleni veamtzeni mirifyon veḥil*” (Strengthen and Sustain My Heart from Weakness and Fear). This poem—as Agnon informs us—was written a few generations *after* R. Tzidkiyahu’s lifetime. Agnon, however, explains that everything written by “our holy poets” is first conceived in a realm beyond the human world. Until such time as these words are needed, they remain in the heavenly realm, but at times, “the chosen ones in each generation feel them and use them between themselves and their Father in Heaven.”⁶⁶

Unless we understand the general context of “eternal language” (poetry, Hebrew) preceding the world, it would seem that Agnon went to needless pains to explain how it was possible for Tzidkiyahu to know a poem written in the future. And yet, as shown

elsewhere, one of Agnon's most important themes is the connection between writing and catastrophe.⁶⁷ Not only is (Hebrew, Jewish) discourse a-temporal and a-local, but Jewish (and by extension, human) suffering is as well. It is as if in every generation the chosen few are tapping the reservoirs of historical disasters and writing. Hence, textual transmission and participation has a historic dimension.

History—biblical history—is evoked in the climactic scene at the synagogue. Because the binding of Isaac is traditionally assumed to have occurred on Yom Kippur, it is customary to read the story of the *'akedah* on that day. R. Tzidkiyahu has just poured out his soul in the words of a *piyut* that has not yet become known in the earthly realm; the author is about to show how God shows his favor. But first, Agnon pauses to summarize the biblical account of Isaac's binding—like R. Tzidkiyahu, he references not only the Bible, but also midrashim. From here, Agnon moves from midrash to the “reality” of his own tale: “The angels of mercy brought Mar Ribbi Tzidkiyahu's tear before the throne of glory and enhanced his strength from above.” Miraculously recovering his vigor, R. Tzidkiyahu stands and leads the congregation in prayer, as he had done so many times in the past. The greatest wonder of all is that after he has recited all the standard prayers preceding the *minḥah* prayer:

A melody started to caress his throat, and he produced solemn and magnificent rhymes. And even though he had burnt his *'akedah*, it came back again and soared out from his throat. . . . Six wings spread above his head, six wings above his head from here and six wings above his head from there, and they began to clap in a great voice, and in the voice was the sound of words . . . [T]he ears, which are not in one's control, heard the words . . . in rhymes and in acrostics, those [words] he had burnt after the poor man had come by after the making of the *'akedah*.”⁶⁸

We now understand why it was important for Agnon to tell us about the eternity of true poetry. R. Tzidkiyahu, as one of the chosen poets, once had access to his own poem, which he then destroyed. Nonetheless, the poem, a true work of art, remains in the heavenly realm. There it waits to be discovered—or, in R. Tzidkiyahu's case, rediscovered.

At the conclusion of Yom Kippur, R. Tzidkiyahu tries to understand the revelation that has taken place. He uses a mystical method known as a “dream query” (*sheelat ḥalom*) and merits a response from heaven, in Aramaic, “lefum tza'ara agra” (“As is the effort, so is the reward”). With this, he understands that his *'akedah* had in fact been accepted by God from the outset. Why was this understanding revealed to him in Aramaic rather than Hebrew? Because, Agnon explains, “he was not wholehearted with regard to the pauper . . . for when one is wholehearted, the Holy One, Blessed be He, takes pleasure with him in the Holy Tongue; if he is not wholehearted, they answer him in Aramaic.”⁶⁹ In fact, the famous phrase, “as is the effort, so is the reward,” appears in Pirkei Avot (5:23) in Aramaic. Agnon actively translates it into Hebrew, and uses the act of translation in the story's poetical and moral framework. Again, we see Agnon's notion of the essential quality of language. God, according to Agnon's professed conviction, created the world using Hebrew, not Aramaic. Hebrew therefore has a higher spiritual standing.

One of the manifestations of the materialistic aspect of language in Jewish tradition is the connection between the human body and the Hebrew language. *Brit milah* (circumcision), for example means literally the “covenant of the word” (*milah* means both “circumcision” and “word”).⁷⁰ *Sefer yetzirah*—which, as noted, is often referenced by Agnon—investigates the relationship between body, language, and the cosmos. There is also a connection of this sort in “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar.” After the incident at the synagogue and after “he heard what he had heard,” R. Tzidkiyahu takes quill in hand, wanting “to put in writing the words that were placed on his mouth, like the ashes of Isaac that are placed on the altar.”⁷¹ Agnon goes into no details, but he is here referring to the well-known exegesis of a biblical verse: “Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember . . .” (Lev. 26:42). In this promise to remember his covenant with the Patriarchs, God uses the word “remember” with regard to Jacob and Abraham, but not with Isaac. Why is this so? According to Rashi, it is because God sees “Isaac’s ashes . . . heaped on the altar.” This, of course, raises a difficulty, since in the end it is a ram, and not Isaac, who is sacrificed (Gen. 22:13). In his supercommentary on Rashi, R. Judah Loew ben Bezalel (the Maharal) explains that, because Isaac was ready and willing to be sacrificed, it is as if he was sacrificed and therefore it was as if his ashes were spread on the altar; thus, it is the act of *’akedah* that is remembered by God.⁷² By definition, the act of remembrance involves words—a language of remembering, as in liturgical poetry or literature.

In *Sefer sofer vesipur*, Agnon cites one of his favorite sources of influence, R. Nahman of Breslov, who claimed that one who is able to write a book and does not, is like someone who has lost a son.⁷³ R. Tzidkiyahu, and by extension Agnon himself, experienced no less than Abraham’s own experience when he was standing before the altar ready to slaughter his son, his dearest poetical creation, for the sake of an unknown, incomprehensible higher being. As Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, so does R. Tzidkiyahu sacrifice his own *’akedah*.⁷⁴ Abraham’s faith is thus intermingled with R. Tzidkiyahu’s “faithful” art.⁷⁵

“Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar” is one of Agnon’s ars-poetic works. In it, Agnon, a Hebrew author, writes about the *’akedah* by means of another Hebrew-language author, the fictional R. Tzidkiyahu. Both make use of a variety of existing traditional knowledge, “as it was written in the Torah and as it was related in the midrash.”⁷⁶ And here we hearken back to *To This Day*, in which the protagonist, Shmuel Yosef, is made, as we have seen, in Agnon’s own image. As it happens, Shmuel Yosef has a friend, and “[t]his friend had the same first and middle names that I did, which was uncommon, since they don’t as a rule go together.”⁷⁷ Moreover, this friend, Yosef Shmuel, is also an author. He is writing a book titled *Phenomenological Taxonomy, or On the Repetition of Things*, in which he seeks to explore how events such as the *’akedah* (that is, unreasoned sacrifice), reoccur throughout history. In “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” the biblical story of the *’akedah* is textually transmitted throughout the ages through commentaries, poetical works, and religious works. The textual whole thus created is not diachronic, but synchronic. If we remember how R. Tzidkiyahu plucked both his own poem and a poem that was to be composed only generations later out of the air, and how his *’akedah* then returned to this eternal textual realm, we understand that textual transmission is more of a textual participation. Imagine a linguistic universe beyond

time and space to which any (Jewish, Hebrew-speaking) human being can gain access at any given moment. Not only do all human generations participate in this realm, but God as well. They all take part in both the creative process and its ultimate tool, namely the language by which everything is created, Hebrew. It is no wonder that the material aspects of this language are very present in “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar.”

For this story’s title, Agnon uses the Hebrew translation of *lefum tza’ara agra*, and makes a point of informing his readers: “I haven’t changed a thing [of the story] and haven’t added a thing, besides giving a name to [it]. And, out of love for the Holy Language, I have named it in the Holy Language, which is holiest of all languages, to praise the names of our God.”⁷⁸ It as if Agnon here detaches himself from R. Tzidkiyahu. Agnon, unlike R. Tzidkiyahu, is entitled to use Hebrew for the title of his story, since he always had faith in it.

Time and Text in “Tehilla”

Apart from language, remembrance requires the notion of time. In Agnon’s “Tehilla,” we can see how these are intertwined in the life of the protagonist. Tehilla is an old woman in Jerusalem whom the (unnamed) narrator meets by chance. After the two have had several encounters, Tehilla asks the narrator to write a letter to her first fiancé, Shraga. Her father had annulled the marriage contract between them, she explains, and Shraga had taken great offense; she seeks finally to appease him. To readers, it seems clear that Shraga is no longer alive. If one takes Tehilla at her word and conceives that she wants to carry the letter with her to her grave, one might ask: Why not simply ask for Shraga’s forgiveness in the hereafter? The answer is that, for Agnon, the act of writing is not a mere means: it makes things happen in this world and even in the hereafter.

Let us start with the protagonist’s name. Tehilla (*tehilah*) means a psalm, the singular form of *tehilim* (Psalms).⁷⁹ Tehilla believes that “all a man’s deeds from his birth to his death are portioned out to him; and even the number of times that a man should recite Psalms.” Agnon could have chosen any act to mark the allotted amount of times one is predetermined to do something; he chose the reciting of Psalms. Tehilla continues: “I have made it my practice to recite a day’s portion each day. Today I went on and completed two daily portions.” If Tehilla (like every human being) has a given amount of times to recite Psalms, and she recites a double portion in the course of a single day, it means that she has shortened her life. (A hard determinist might claim that this day as well is part of Tehilla’s predestined life.) And, indeed, Tehilla says: “When I thought this over I felt sad, for maybe I am no longer necessary in the world and they want to be done with me and are urging me on to finish my share and complete my portion.” And yet, she adds, “it is good to give thanks to the Lord” (Ps. 92:2). As far as Tehilla is concerned, life has value only if one can use it to praise the Lord. In death, one cannot recite Psalms, one cannot utter “so much as a single word” to sing God’s glory.⁸⁰

Language is both a motif and the plot’s catalyst. As Tehilla tells it, the notion of measuring one’s life by language has accompanied her since her childhood.⁸¹ As

a “chatterbox,” she was always at the center of attention, until “an old man living nearby . . . told those who were happy at my chatter, ‘What a pity about this child who wastes all her words in infancy, for what will be left over for her old age?’”⁸² Ever since, she explains, she has been “weighing every word,” making “practice of speaking little.”⁸³ Language is also central for the narrator; as in some of Agnon’s other stories, he is “a man of the pen.” Tehilla links the connection between a scribe and a writer (both denoted in Hebrew by the word *sofer*) when she eventually makes her request:

I have heard that you are a man of the pen, that you are a modern-day scribe. Maybe you can loan me your pen for a little letter. . . . Here is a sheet of paper, first-grade paper . . . from the times when they used to make good paper. . . . One thing more I ask of you, write in the square letters of the prayer book, or in the Torah script.⁸⁴

For Tehilla, writing is a holy occupation. As with the work of traditional Jewish scribes,

the quality of the material meant for writing—the paper (or parchment), the pen (the quill) and the shape of the letters (“square letters” or “Torah script”)—are important because they determine the quality of the words and their meaning. Tehilla’s request that the narrator write the letter is actually a request to write her life, to transcribe the events of her life, or, better formulated, to consciously connect between time and language.

The connection between language and time, words and events, already exists in the prewritten version of Tehilla’s story, that is, her actual life. All the major events in her life are intimately connected with texts, some strictly halakhic, some based on custom. For instance, we know the year of her birth because, following a custom found among both Christians and Jews, her father had written the date, along with those of her other siblings, in his Bible. Another instance is that of Shraga’s father placing an order for the writing of a pair of tefillin (phylacteries) for his son, which hints that Shraga is old enough to take upon himself all the decrees of the Torah, including marriage.

Many of the halakhic texts marking the stages of Tehilla’s life are annulled contracts. Most significant is the marriage contract betrothing her to Shraga, which is torn to shreds by her father, the head of the local Jewish community, when he discovers that Shraga and his family are hasidim; for the father, this is tantamount to their having renounced Judaism altogether. In response: “Shraga leaped up and swore that he would never forgive us the insult. And father never bothered to ask Shraga’s forgiveness, although he knew that if you annul a match you have to ask forgiveness of the humiliated party.” In addition, Tehilla’s father excommunicates Shraga’s family, barring the men from being called up in the synagogue to read the Torah. As Tehilla tells it: “If they had not gone to another town where they were called up to the Torah, they would never have lived out their year.”⁸⁵ That is to say, without actively participating in the social transmitting of the text, participating in the cycle of reading the Torah, they would have no reason to exist.

This perception of language and world is not unique to Tehilla. As we have seen, it is part of the intimate relationship between the Jewish people and the text. It is thus

no wonder that the narrator shares the same notion. For instance, he writes that, every time he visits Jerusalem, it seems to him that the city is renewing itself:

He Who by His goodness renews the work of Creation every day makes His city anew every hour. New buildings are not built, new plants are not planted, yet Jerusalem herself keeps on becoming new. Whenever I enter the City she seems new to me. I do not know in what this novelty consists. Let the great clarifiers [that is, commentators] come and clarify it for us.⁸⁶

Jerusalem is not a city and Tehilla is not an old woman; they are both texts. The multiple use of the word “new” is also deeply connected with the text and with the basic Jewish intellectual activity not only of transmitting the text but also—and no less important—of participating in it by means of “renewing” it. Thus, Jerusalem is like the written Torah in that “new buildings are not built, new plants are not planted,” but the city nonetheless miraculously “keeps on becoming new.” The stress here is on “becoming,” including both the idea of transmitting and participating. As with Tehilla, the narrator uses texts to measure time. So that, in wondering whether Shraga is still alive, he notes the passage of time “since the day your father tore up the betrothal agreement”; Tehilla acknowledges that Shraga has been dead for thirty years.⁸⁷

All of the tragedies in Tehilla’s life can be traced back to this broken engagement, for which she never received a “writ of forgiveness.”⁸⁸ She marries another man and has two sons with him, but loses both of them in events that are connected to tefillin. Her firstborn, a sickly child, suffers a shock shortly before his bar mitzvah when he sees a “man dressed in shrouds like a corpse.” Although this is not a corpse but rather “a madman who used to do crazy things,” her son does not recover from the shock but “went on flickering like a memorial candle during the closing prayer on Yom Kippur. And before he ever had a chance to put on his phylacteries he gave up his soul and died.”⁸⁹ Two years later, her other son, approaching his own bar mitzvah, disappears on the way to the *sofer* who is writing his tefillin. Sometime later, her husband dies. Tehilla is left with an only daughter, whom she hopes one day to marry to a Torah scholar. In the end, however, her daughter becomes an apostate, or as Tehilla puts it, “an evil spirit entered into my daughter and she became crazy.”⁹⁰ It appears that Agnon doesn’t quite trust his readers, and perhaps Tehilla doesn’t trust the narrator, her listener, to make the proper connection between these events. Thus, the author, through Tehilla (speaking of her elder son’s death), makes the matter explicit:

During the seven days of mourning I sat thinking to myself, My son died at the close of the Sabbath, after the Havdala ceremony, thirty days before his time for putting on phylacteries, and it was at the close of the Sabbath after the Havdala ceremony thirty days before I was to go under the bridal canopy with Shraga that father tore up the betrothal agreement.⁹¹

Once Tehilla has finished recounting her story, she dictates her letter. When it is done, she seals it in a jar and, accompanied by the narrator, goes to the Burial Society. Here we learn of another textual ritual of hers. Each year she goes to the Burial Society to renew the contract for her grave on the Mount of Olives. Like a Japanese death poet,

Tehilla knows exactly when she will die, and, as with these poets, the event itself is intimately connected with language and text. Indeed, Tehilla has already invited the “the purifiers and washers to come” and prepare her body for burial.⁹²

Tehilla concludes both her spiritual and earthly affairs on the same day by the writing and sealing of two texts, the writ of forgiveness addressed to Shraga and the deed on her grave. The narrator and the clerk at the Burial Society end Tehilla’s life by writing the last words of both texts. Though she has resigned from life she needs the writ to be signed, as she tells the clerk: “If I still have years to live . . . I gladly give them to you and to all who wish for life. Here is the contract. Sign it.”⁹³ The narrator, like Agnon himself by the very act of writing Tehilla’s life, is also the author of her death.

Tehilla is using preformulated texts (Psalms, contracts) not only to define the major events in her life but also to fill everything in between. Tehilla’s and Shraga’s lives constitute a crossroad on the boundless linguistic space, as his textual curse is transmitted into Tehilla’s life. Language is both the disease and its antidote, a cure made of the very substance of the poison.

Transmitting Nothingness: From the Whiteness between the Letters to the Absent Library

Let us briefly observe another important aspect of the materialistic aspect of language, namely, the materialistic notion of absence.⁹⁴ One would expect the materialistic aspect of language to be a celebration of presence. The promethean fire given to humanity is language, Hebrew according to Jewish tradition, and with language one can gain direct access to the essence of things. From this it follows that the materiality of language—its words, letters, and shapes, and the surface upon which they are written—all have meaning. We may add here that one of the manifestations of this approach, seemingly breaking the biblical prohibition against idol worship, is the phenomenon of textual amulets, the fetish of written language. However, if we explore the consequences of the perception of language as depicted above, and especially its materialistic aspect, we might reach one of the conclusions arrived at by rabbinical Judaism. In the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple, the Sages were left with language and its material aspects as the only means of accessing the divine. Hence, they took the exploration of learning and language (Hebrew especially) to an extreme, according more significance to the process of learning than to the moment of achieving knowledge. Intellectual discourse is crucial even in kabbalistic texts: Agnon cites the Zohar and tells us: “Once the world was created it could not have been sustained had it not occurred to the Divine Will to create human beings, who would engage in the study of Torah, for the sake of which the world would be sustained. Now, those who delve into the Torah and engage in its study are as if they sustained the whole world.”⁹⁵

Man participates and sustains creation through textual transmission. The world of things and deeds does not exist independently of the Torah, of language. One might say that the Jewish “linguistic turn” was an historical outcome. Since the destruction

of the Second Temple, the symbolic connection between the people of Israel, the land of Israel, and the God of Israel is no longer a place (the Temple) but rather a function of discourse and language.⁹⁶ And yet, if we are left only with language, our only option is an endless play of meaning; there is never any resting on a point of absolute, transcendental meaning. Thus the materiality of language is deeply connected with its opposite phenomenon: the materiality of absence.

In the art of Jewish scribes, the whiteness between the letters (the absence, if you will), has an important positive function. As one of Agnon's characters in a story titled "Sefer takhlit hama'asim" (The Book on the Purpose of Deeds) tells us:

The Sages of his generation said that R. Meir the scribe was worthy of being paid a *sela'* for each word he wrote and a *sela'* for the whiteness in the scroll between each letter and each word, for just as he was punctilious in his writing, so was he punctilious in keeping the spaces between the letters and between each word, until the whiteness in the scroll illuminated the writing and itself. I have heard it said in the name of R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, may his soul rest in heaven, that even in the whiteness of the scroll there is holiness and light, but that one shall perceive this light in the whiteness only when our Messiah is come.⁹⁷

In other work by Agnon, we are offered a negative dimension of materialistic linguistic absence. In *Sefer sofer vesipur* he mentions one of the most famous hasidic stories about R. Nahman of Breslov, that concerning a burnt book. After many misfortunes in his life, R. Nahman concludes that the cause for his misery is a book he had written. He demands that his students burn all copies of this book, now known famously as "the burnt book." According to Agnon, R. Natan (R. Nahman's most important disciple), wrote the following:

When I was writing the holy book in front of our Rebbe, which was burned under his command, our Rebbe told me, "If you only knew what you are writing, etc." I answered him humbly, "But of course, I know nothing at all." He replied, "You do not know how much you do not know."⁹⁸

Another book attesting to R. Nahman's presence by way of absence is "the hidden book." R. Natan quotes R. Nahman as saying that this book was regarded as "the secret of secrets . . . and [he] said that only the Messiah will give commentary on this book."⁹⁹ Agnon had his own personal burnt book. In 1924, while he was living in Germany, someone set fire to the building he was living in. The fire devoured his collection of rare books, manuscripts, and even a completed novel, *Bitzror haḥayim* (In Eternal Life).¹⁰⁰ Agnon never ceased mourning the loss of this book, mentioning it even in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech.¹⁰¹

The notion of missing texts appears in many of Agnon's works. In "Fable of the Goat," a son, at his father's request, follows a she-goat through a hidden path that leads to the land of Israel. He writes a note to his father and places it in the goat's ear, but the father fails to find it. Thinking his son has been killed, he has the goat slaughtered; it is only then that the un-transmitted text falls from the goat's ear, bearing the son's message on how to follow the animal to the Promised Land.¹⁰² Other stories in the same vein include "Haderashah" (The Sermon) "Sefer sheaved" (A Book That

Was Lost) and “‘Al even aḥat” (On One Stone), all of which focus on the loss of books or manuscripts.¹⁰³

In *To This Day*, the existence of an entire library is in question. The narrator is asked by the widow of Dr. Levi (= Moses?) to advise her about two rooms filled with books (= the Written Torah and the Oral Torah?) her husband had left to her.¹⁰⁴ A reader who follows the narrator’s descriptions of their meetings might well be reminded of Paradise and the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai:

The house stood . . . in the middle of a garden . . . I remember strolling through it with Dr. Levi, picking fruit and marveling at his knowledge while the birds, loathe to interrupt his displays of erudition, soared in silence overhead.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, following this line of interpretation, the death of Dr. Levi signals an expulsion from a paradise of text, of knowledge. When the narrator returns to Dr. Levi’s garden “it was desolate, its flowers gone, its trees cut down, crows cawing from their stumps.”¹⁰⁶ At the end of *To This Day*, the narrator has his own house, big enough for all of Dr. Levi’s books. The rooms reserved for them, however, remain empty.

Conclusion

One can compare the moments of text transmission to what Jacques Lacan called “points de capiton,” moments in which we have the (necessary) illusion of fixed meaning.¹⁰⁷ In order to create these moments of fixed meaning from the amorphous textual nebula (in our case, the Jewish corpus), one must make them apparent. The text (in our case, a Jewish text) becomes material, like a drop of water falling from an intangible linguistic cloud. One cannot transmit a text without materialization in spoken or written language. And by the very transmission of a given text, one perforce participates in it.

If words and things are submerged one inside the other, the concrete matter of which language is made bears meaning as well. The paper, the parchment, the “whiteness” of the text on which the letters are written; the black or gold (or other color) ink they are written in; the book the letters create; the library—all of these bear meaning.

Rabbinical Judaism was well aware of that notion, and Agnon, for his part, consciously took part in one of the most original ideas of rabbinical Judaism—indeed, the idea that defined it as such, namely, the notion of receiving on Mount Sinai both the Oral and the Written Torah. The creation of the Oral Torah is eternal; it is a human project that will last until the end of time. Students, commentators, authors like Agnon himself, and readers are all tapping into this textual reservoir during the course of their lifetimes. For Agnon, with his anthologies and his continuous references to Jewish sources, text belongs not to the epistemological realm but rather to the ontological. Language, learning, text, and Torah are an indispensable part of his work and art. Agnon’s own work, as with Jerusalem in “Tehilla,” “keeps on becoming new,” as it is part of a larger scheme of words that in itself is always becoming new. Agnon is a paradigm of human agency in Jewish textual intimacy,¹⁰⁸ part of a weighty tradition that

consciously demands of its adherents not only to transmit what they have received from the generations before, but to actively participate in its creation.

Notes

1. Gershom Scholem, "Yemei Agnon begermanyah," *Davar* (9 December 1966); Dan Laor, *Hayei Agnon: Biografyah* (Jerusalem: 1998), 92.
2. Among the "special occasion" anthologies published by Jüdischer Verlag were *Chad Gadja: ein Pessachbuch* (1914) and *Moaus Zur: Chanukkahbuch* (1916); see Laor, *Hayei Agnon*, 101, 116.
3. Gershom Scholem, "Reflections on S.Y. Agnon," *Commentary* 44, no. 6 (1967), 59.
4. Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot 'al sipurei Sh.Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: 1976), 287.
5. When possible, this essay will cite and refer to published English versions of Agnon's works. In the case of these three anthologies, only the first (*Yamim noraim*) was translated in full as *Days of Awe* (New York: 1948), trans. Maurice T. Galpert and Jacob Sloan, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (see also the introduction by Judah Goldin to the 1965 edition, in which he indicates several instances in which the original translation was changed). *Sefer sofer vesipur* has not been translated to date; *Atem reitem* (Jerusalem: 1959) was translated in part as *Present at Sinai*, trans. Michael Swirsky (Philadelphia: 1994).
6. Dov Sadan wrote to Agnon after the publication of *Days of Awe* in 1938, commenting that, as fine a work as it was, it was a waste of time and unworthy of Agnon's talent (Laor, *Hayei Agnon*, 288).
7. Shmuel Yosef Agnon and David Kena'ani, *Sh.Y. Agnon be'al peh* (Tel Aviv: 1972), 96–97.
8. Letter from Agnon to his wife, Esther (dated August 1938), quoted in Laor, *Hayei Agnon*, 296. See also Agnon, *Atem reitem*, 25 and his interview with Galia Yardeni, "Sh.Y. Agnon," in *Tet-zayin sihot 'im sofrim* (Tel Aviv: 1995), 54.
9. Agnon, *Atem reitem*, 19.
10. For a recent elaborated discussion of this issue, see Tzahi Weiss, *Otiyot shenivreu bahen shamayim vaaretz: hamekorot vehamashma'uyot shel ha'isuk beotiyot haalefbet keyehidot 'atzmayot basifrut hayehudit* (Jerusalem: 2015).
11. Kazuya Hara, "The Word 'Is' the Thing: The 'Kotodama' Belief in Japanese Communication," *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics* 58, no. 3 (Fall 2001), 280.
12. J.M.Y. Simpson, *A First Course in Linguistics* (Edinburgh: 1979), 3.
13. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "The Sense of Smell," in idem, *A Book That Was Lost: Thirty-Five Stories*, ed. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman, additional stories ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New Milford: 2008), 149. For Hebrew see "Hush hareah" in *Kol sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef 'Agnon*, vol. 2, *Elu veelu* (Jerusalem: 1966), 296–302.
14. There are other entities said to exist before the creation of the world; see, for example, Agnon, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 19; Midrash rabah 1:4.
15. Avot deRabi Natan 31:2. After Sigmund Katznelson, the director of Jüdischer Verlag (Agnon's publisher before Schocken), suspended the publication of Agnon's books, he wrote to Schocken that "the Holy One, Blessed be He was playing with the Torah for nine hundred and seventy-four generations until he delivered it. And now, I shall amuse myself with my exemplar and you, Sir, with your exemplar, until our generation is worthy of receiving our Torah." See Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Shlomo Zalman Schocken, *Hilufe'i igrot 1936–1959* (Jerusalem: 1991), 275–277. For more on the number 974, see Agnon, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 18; idem, *Present at Sinai*, 15, 18 (for Hebrew, *Atem reitem*, 31, 34).
16. Agnon, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 17.
17. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *To This Day*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New Milford: 2008).
18. *Ibid.*, 106.
19. Agnon, *Present at Sinai*, 18 (for Hebrew, *Atem reitem*, 33).
20. Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: 2002), 29.

21. Agnon, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 136.
22. Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, trans. and annotated J.L. Ackrill (Oxford: 1963), 43–44 (16a19; 16a26).
23. Agnon, “The Sign,” in *A Book That Was Lost*, 425. For Hebrew see “Hasiman” in *Kol sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef ’Agnon*, vol. 8, *Haesh veba’etzim* (Jerusalem: 1966), 283–312.
24. For relevant sources in Agnon, see, for example, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 161, 222, 334, 339.
25. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Me’atzmi el ’atzmi* (Jerusalem: 1976), 222.
26. Agnon and Kena’ani, *Sh.Y. Agnon be’al peh*, 34. Agnon was very serious about the matter, as his daughter, Emunah Yaron, confirmed in an interview. See Yaakov Shmuel Spiegel, *’Amudim betoledot hasefer ha’ivri: hagahot umagihim* (Ramat Gan: 1972), 26 (ff. 8).
27. Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in idem, *Jorge Luis Borges: Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: 1998), 88–95.
28. Agnon, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 111–126.
29. *Ibid.*, 113.
30. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, “‘Edo and ’Enam,” in idem, *Kol sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef ’Agnon*, vol. 7, *’Ad Hena* (Jerusalem: 1966), 343–395; cf. Kurzweil, *Masot ’al sipurav shel Sh.Y. Agnon*, 142 (Kurzweil is critical of this aspect of the story). Other examples of the importance of single letters in Agnon’s works include the *vav* in “Le’ahar hase’udah,” in *Lifnim min haḥomah* (Jerusalem: 1976), 260–261 and *lamed* in “The Document,” in *A Book That Was Lost*, 439 (for Hebrew, see “Hate’udah,” in *Kol sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef ’Agnon*, vol. 6, *Samukh venireh* (Jerusalem: 1966), 116).
31. For more on these characters, see Haim Be’er, *Ḥadarim meleim sefarim: “republikat hasefer” be’Ad hena bein bedayah lemetziyut* (Jerusalem: 2016), 55–76, 87–95. Herr König may be based on Leo König, who was a Yiddish author and an art student at the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem (see Haim Be’er, *Gam ahavatam gam sinatam* [Tel Aviv: 2002], 28). The fact that Leo König wrote in Yiddish rather than Hebrew may explain Agnon’s patronizing characterization.
32. Agnon, *To This Day*, 31.
33. *Ibid.*, 77.
34. For an original and comprehensive study of *Sefer yetzirah*, see Yehudah Liebes, *Torat hayetzirah shel sefer yetzirah* (Jerusalem: 2000).
35. *Sefer Yetzirah: The Aryeh Kaplan Edition* (Northvale, N.J.: 1995).
36. Agnon, *To This Day*, 129; cf. idem, “Hanidah,” in *Elu ve’elu*, 9–56. An English version recently appeared as the title story in idem, *The Outcast and Other Tales*, trans. Marganit Weinberger-Rotman, ed. and annotated Jeffrey Saks (New Milford: 2018).
37. See Laor, *Ḥayei Agnon*, 132–134, where he notes the importance Agnon attached to this story (it was dedicated to Agnon’s father).
38. Agnon, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 97.
39. Agnon, *To This Day*, 119.
40. *Ibid.*, 160.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, 32. In Mittel’s account, he was ultimately vindicated. He tells Shmuel Yosef: “You know me well, my friend. I’ve never wished anyone ill. Still, at that moment I couldn’t help feeling sorry that Steinschneider was dead, because had he been alive, the one to feel sorry would have been him” (*ibid.*).
43. It may or may not be coincidental that the project Shmuel Yosef is ostensibly working on is a “universal history of clothing” (*ibid.*, 50). In this sense he may be regarded as a meta-tailor who not only cuts but also reassembles texts; indeed, the Latin word *textus* is derived from the verb *texere*, “woven.”
44. See Dan Miron, “German Jews in Agnon’s Work,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 23 (1978), 277. For more on Steinschneider, see Reimund Leicht and Gad Freudenthal (eds.), *Studies on Steinschneider: Moritz Steinschneider and the Emergence of the Science of Judaism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Leiden: 2012).
45. “Ribi” is a variant form of Rabbi.

46. Michal Arbell, “Haḥazanit ha’atzuvah Miryam Devorah veḥazanim aḥerim besipurei ’Agnon: ‘Haḥazanim’ ve-‘Lefi hatz’ar hasakhar,” ’*Ayin Gimmel* 2 (2012), 120 (n. 32); Laor, *Hayei ’Agnon*, 380.

47. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” in *Haesh veba’etzim* (Jerusalem: 1966), 7.

48. One of these colleagues is the main character in Agnon’s “Tale of the Scribe” (appearing in *A Book That Was Lost*, 177–194). Here as well one can easily see how Agnon’s description of the work of the religious poet is essentially materialistic.

49. Agnon, “The Sense of Smell,” in *A Book That Was Lost*, 141.

50. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 8. For a similar description of pre-writing rituals, see idem, “The Tale of the Scribe,” in *A Book That Was Lost*, 179.

51. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 8.

52. Agnon, “The Sense of Smell,” 139–146.

53. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 6.

54. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

55. Agnon, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 161.

56. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 5–6.

57. *Ibid.*, 7.

58. *Ibid.*, 9.

59. *Ibid.*, 11.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, 12.

62. See, for instance, Dan Laor, *Sh.Y. ’Agnon: hebetim ḥadashim* (Tel Aviv: 1995), 62.

63. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 12.

64. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

65. *Ibid.*, 13.

66. *Ibid.*, 14.

67. See Yaniv Hagbi, “Aspects of Primary Holocaust in the Works of S.Y. Agnon,” in *Agnon and Germany: The Presence of the German World in the Writings of S.Y. Agnon*, ed. Hans Jürgen Becker and Hillel Weiss (Ramat Gan: 2010), 451–472.

68. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 16–17.

69. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

70. See, for example, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The Cut That Binds: The Western Ashkenazic Torah Binder as Nexus between Circumcision and Torah,” in *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, ed. Victor Witter Turner (Washington, D.C.: 1982), 136–146.

71. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 18.

72. R. Judah Loew ben Bezalel, *Gur Aryeh ’al hatorah* (Lev. 26:42).

73. Agnon, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 137.

74. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 18.

75. Here, too, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar” invites comparison with “The Tale of the Scribe.” In the latter story, the artist is a *sofer*, a scribe of ritualistic Jewish texts. Among those who come to him are childless couples to ask him to write a Torah scroll. This is meant to be a kind of replacement for their unborn child, to help them pay an unwritten debt of creation they owe God, the world, the cosmos (Agnon, “The Tale of the Scribe,” in idem, *A Book That Was Lost*, 177).

76. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 9.

77. Agnon, *To This Day*, 91.

78. Agnon, “Lefi hatza’ar hasakhar,” 18.

79. Eddy Zemach cleverly noted that Tehilla is the personification of Psalm 104. See his work *Keriah tamah basifrut ha’ivrit bat hameah ha’esrim* (Jerusalem: 1990), 71–90.

80. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, “Tehilla,” in idem, *Tehilla and Other Israeli Tales*, trans. I.M. Lask (London: 1956), 19.

81. Cf. Michal Arbell’s interpretation of Agnon’s story “In the Prime of Her Life” in idem, *Katuv ’al oro shel kelev: ’al tefisat hayetzirah etzel Sh.Y. Agnon* (Tel Aviv: 2006) 41–46.

82. Agnon, “Tehilla,” 20.

83. *Ibid.*; see also 21, 29, 31–32.
84. *Ibid.*, 30.
85. *Ibid.*, 38.
86. *Ibid.*, 26.
87. *Ibid.*, 42.
88. *Ibid.*, 38.
89. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
90. *Ibid.*, 42.
91. *Ibid.*, 40.
92. *Ibid.*, 45.
93. *Ibid.*
94. For more detailed discussion, see Patrick Fuery, *The Theory of Absence: Subjectivity, Signification and Desire* (Westport: 1995).
95. Agnon, *Present at Sinai*, 18.
96. That is how Peter Hayman interprets *Sefer yetzirah*; see, for example, his essay “Was God a Magician? Sefer Yesira and Jewish Magic,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40, no. 2 (1989), 232.
97. Agnon, “Sefer takhlit hama’asim,” in *Haesh v’eha’etzim*, 194.
98. Agnon, *Sefer sofer vesipur*, 428.
99. *Ibid.*
100. Laor, *Hayei Agnon*, 161.
101. Agnon, *Me’atzmi el ’atzmi*, 7–8. He mentioned it on other occasions as well (*ibid.*, 139–140, 213–214, 271); *idem* and Kena’ani, *Agnon ba’al peh*, 22. Furthermore, within his belletristic work, Agnon mentions the loss of *In Eternal Life* several times—for example, in *idem*, *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (London: 1968), 206–208.
102. S.Y. Agnon, “Fable of the Goat,” in *idem*, *A Book That Was Lost*, 199–202 (for Hebrew, see “Ma’aseh ha’ez,” in *Elu veelu*, 373–375). For more on this idea in Agnon’s work, see Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S.Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: 1991), 32.
103. The English texts can be found in the following books by Agnon: “The Sermon,” in *A Dwelling Place for My People: Sixteen Stories of the Chassidim*, trans. Jacob Weinberg and Helen M. Russell (Edinburgh: 1983)—in Hebrew, “Haderasha,” in *’Elu v’eele*, 213–215; “A Book That Was Lost,” in *A Book That Was Lost*, 137–144—in Hebrew, “Sefer she’avad” in *’Ir umloah* (Jerusalem: 1973), 207–211; “On One Stone,” in *A Book That Was Lost*, 145–148—in Hebrew, “’Al even ahat,” in *Elu veelu*, 302–304.
104. Avraham Kariv, “Ribui partzufin uklaster ehad” in *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: Mivhar maa-marim ’al yetzirato*, ed. Hillel Barzel (Tel Aviv: 1982), 294–298. For more on Dr. Levi, see Be’er, *Hadarim meleim sefarim*, 29–54.
105. Agnon, *To This Day*, 39–40. See Nitza Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo meusharot: tiskul eroti, omanut umavet be’avodotav shel ’Agnon* (Tel Aviv: 1997), 120.
106. *Ibid.*
107. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: 1977), 303.
108. On Jewish textual intimacy, see Avriel Bar-Levav, “Intimiyut textualit uvrit hakeriah bein gerush sefarad leAmsterdam,” in *Baderekh el hamodernah: shai leYosef Kaplan*, ed. Avriel Bar-Levav, Claude B. Stuczynski, and Michael Heyd (Jerusalem: 2018).